Taslima Nasrin's Return to Kolkata: A Liberal Failure the Right Exploited

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Taslima Nasrin's proposed return to Kolkata after nearly two decades for a literary event at Rabindra Sadan on 1 August has attracted considerable attention. While it marks the long-awaited return of a writer who regarded Kolkata as her second home, it is also a political event.

After being forced out of the city by a regime that claimed to embody secular and progressive values, she is finally returning under the patronage of a Hindu nationalist government, despite having spent her public life defending secularism and resisting religious orthodoxy. Nasrin's return is therefore not merely about the end of her exile from a city she cherished. It is also about what made that reversal possible and what it reveals about West Bengal's changing ideological landscape.

The Exile After an Exile

In 1994, Taslima Nasrin fled Bangladesh under the Khaleda Zia government after receiving death threats, facing criminal prosecution, and calls for her execution by Islamist groups following the publication of *Lajja*, her novel on the persecution of Bangladesh's Hindu minority. Granted political asylum in Sweden, what began as refuge became a life in exile.

She settled in Kolkata in 2004, only to be driven out three years later after Islamist protests against her autobiography *Dwikhandito*. Instead of defending her freedom of expression, the Left Front government banned the book in the name of maintaining communal harmony and forced her to leave West Bengal in 2007. While a handful of writers and intellectuals defended her publicly, much of Bengal's progressive establishment either supported the ban or remained conspicuously silent, exposing a disconnect between professed liberal values and the willingness to defend them when politically inconvenient.

After several months under effective house arrest in New Delhi, Nasrin left India in 2008. She returned to Sweden before eventually settling in the United States, where she still lives.

Behind the Return

Nasrin's proposed return, however, is not simply a cultural event but a carefully choreographed political exercise.

The programme is publicly presented as an initiative of a few civil society groups, with the BJP government merely facilitating security arrangements. Yet a closer look at the organisers reveals a coordinated effort involving groups closely aligned with the Hindutva ecosystem.

One of the principal organisers, Secular Mission, has been active in West Bengal for more than a decade. It has campaigned for reforms within Muslim society, opposing practices such as triple talaq and polygamy while long advocating for a Uniform Civil Code. Such activism, in itself, is neither unusual nor objectionable.

More revealing is its broader political orientation. Despite professing a commitment to secularism, Secular Mission has largely confined its interventions to Muslim society, while its positions on issues ranging from cow sacrifice and beef consumption to madrasa education and Hindu-Muslim relations have often echoed Hindutva narratives. It has also worked closely with groups such as the Progressive Muslim Society, the Nationalist Muslim Society and the Reformist Muslim Society, some of which have a history of collaborating with Hindu nationalists and cultivating Muslim intellectuals who later aligned with the BJP in West Bengal. More recently, its head was appointed the sole Muslim member of the West Bengal government's committee to examine the draft Uniform Civil Code.

The remaining two organisers have even more explicit links to the Hindu nationalist camp.

The Human Rights Beyond Frontiers Foundation (HRBFF) was registered on 13 May 2026, just days after the BJP's victory in the West Bengal Assembly election. Its first public programme was not a campaign on civil liberties or human rights but a felicitation ceremony for BJP politician Swapan Dasgupta following his electoral victory. Publicly available information on its office-bearers also points to close ties with Hindu Right circles, including the BJP and Hindu Samhati.

The third organiser, Paschimbanger Janya ("For West Bengal"), has long campaigned on issues concerning Bengali Hindus on both sides of the India-Bangladesh border. Its leadership also maintains longstanding ties with the BJP-RSS network, and its campaigns broadly reflect Hindu nationalist priorities.

An Introspection, Long Pending

The significance of Taslima Nasrin's return lies less in the event itself than in the questions it raises. Above all, it demands an overdue introspection, particularly from Bengal's liberal intelligentsia.

The response so far has been telling. While much of the Left leadership has remained silent, those who have spoken have either denied the Left Front government's responsibility for Nasrin's exile, blaming the then UPA government at the Centre instead, or dismissed her as an ally of the BJP-RSS.

Even if some of Nasrin's recent interventions are open to criticism, they cannot retrospectively justify the decisions that forced her out of Kolkata in 2007. Yet much of Bengal's liberal politics remains trapped in familiar binaries and defensive whataboutery. Rather than questioning Nasrin's present positions or whether she speaks consistently against every form of religious extremism, the more important question is why a writer who spent much of her public life confronting religious orthodoxy found acceptance primarily within the Hindu nationalist fold. The same question extends to the proximity that has developed over the years between several Muslim reform groups, advocates of Hindu minorities in Bangladesh, and Hindutva politics.

By facilitating Nasrin's return, the BJP has gained political mileage from an event that has simultaneously drawn the support of prominent figures from Bengal's cultural life, illustrating how selective liberalism can create opportunities for political appropriation. More significantly, it can now even dispense with intellectual validation altogether because the moral authority of those who seek to confer it has itself become vulnerable to historical scrutiny.

The same inconsistencies persisted under the Trinamool Congress. The cancellation of the launch of Nasrin's *Nirbashan* at the 2012 Kolkata Book Fair, and of a stage adaptation of *Lajja* in 2024 on the grounds of possible communal tension, reinforced the perception that difficult questions surrounding religious fundamentalism were better avoided than defended. Each episode strengthened the Right's claim that secularism had become selective.

If liberal politics is to regain credibility, it must move beyond electoral calculations and confront its own inconsistencies. Public discourse is increasingly organised around binaries—Palestinian Muslims or Bangladeshi Hindus, refugees or infiltrators, Hindu interests or Muslim victimhood—leaving little room for a principled opposition to all forms of religious extremism. Unless liberals defend their principles consistently, regardless of who is threatened or who poses the threat, others will continue to occupy the moral and political space they have gradually ceded.

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